
GIESSO

Gesso was the medium chosen by Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh for arguably her finest work, and yet little is known of exactly what gesso is or why she chose it. The answer to the first question is that gesso is a mixture of Plaster of Paris, whiting, rabbit skin glue and water. This combination makes for an extremely permanent and brilliantly white material, which is ideal for modelling with, and makes the perfect ground on which to paint.

The first known use of gesso is by the ancient Egyptians, and it should be remembered here that when Margaret and her sister Frances were at Glasgow School of Art in the early 1890s they were described by a contemporary as being "Egyptian crazy". It was used in the pyramids as a ground for the paintings and hieroglyphics on the walls of the inner chambers and on the mummy cases, and so started to achieve a measure of magical significance.

Not only that but as a great deal of the culture of the Old Kingdom came from the much earlier Mesopotamian Empire, it can be said that the use of gesso goes right back to the very beginnings of civilization as we know it. However, it was more recently, in the early 1400s in Italy during the Renaissance that gesso once more started to come into its own.

It was prized as a base for painting due to the brilliant luminosity of the non-yellowing white ground that it made, which added hugely to the brightness of the colours then being used for the first time. When you consider the visual impact of so many of the great works of the period this fact should be remembered.

Later, during the Arts and Crafts period there was again a revival of the use of gesso, spearheaded by Walter Crane who ran summer classes for arts and crafts teachers



The Seven Princesses c.1906 by Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh (MAK - Austrian Museum of Applied Arts)

at the Kensington Institute, which was later to become the Victoria and Albert Museum. Fra Newbery was one of those teachers who went there to learn the art of gesso.

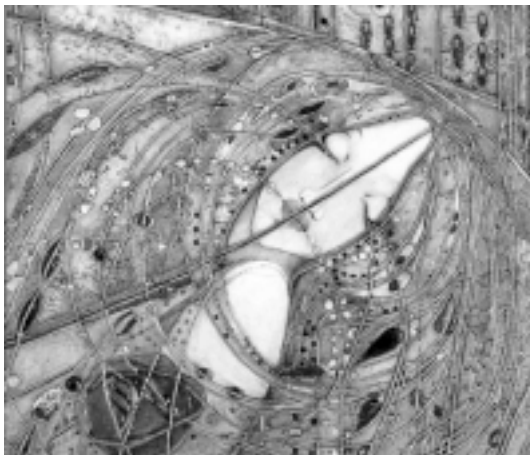
When he returned to Glasgow he initiated classes, which he himself taught, at the Glasgow School of Art. I think it can be safely said that Margaret Macdonald was one of the pupils at these classes, but sadly no records have yet been found to back this up.

Quite why, apart from the ancient and possibly magical associations, Margaret chose gesso as a medium only becomes clear when you consider her interest in all things Celtic and in the natural world of plants. Here was a new way of drawing in relief her versions of the kind of intricate linear designs that she had already been creating in beaten brass and copper, but with one amazing difference - colour.

At last she could use colour in paint and glassbeads and semi precious stones which brought to life her vision. In this way Margaret Macdonald achieved her real potential as an artist in her own right, producing some of the greatest artworks of the early 20th century.

Dai Vaughan

Dai Vaughan of Vaughan Art-Works will be giving a talk at Queen's Cross on Wednesday 16 October 2002.



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